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TAGS: PTER PREL PGOV KISL PINR ASEC IR AJ
SUBJECT: FURTHER DETAILS ON JANUARY 14 ARRESTS -- ALLEGED
IRANIAN-DIRECTED EXTREMIST RING

REF: BAKU 84

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (S/NF) Presidential Legal Advisor Fuad Alasgarov (responsible, among other things, for oversight of law enforcement issues in the Presidential Apparatus) told us today that the January 14 arrests (ref) were a "very serious" development that disrupted a ring of "Iranian spies" who were plotting to commit acts of terrorism in Azerbaijan, including sabotage against the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. He said the group had been trying to create a "cell" in Azerbaijan, commenting that this Iranian-sponsored activity in Azerbaijan was indicative of Iranian worldwide plans. According to Alasgarov, the ring involved "at least" 23 people, all of whom are Azerbaijani citizens. Some of these people, Alasgarov said, are "very much of interest to the United States." He urged the Embassy to meet with the Ministry of National Security for more details. (In a separate meeting with C/SIMO, Minister of National Security Eldar Mahmudov provided more detail. Separate report forthcoming.)

¶2. (C) Alasgarov said that the January 14 arrests were not related to the 2006 arrest and conviction of an Azerbaijani citizen on charges of spying for Iran. In that case, Alasgarov said, an "Iranian spy" had been trying to "win the confidence" of government officials. "I regret to tell you," Alasgarov said, "that he was successful." Alasgarov again stressed that this case was not/not related to the ongoing investigation of the 23 individuals arrested on January 24.

¶3. (C) Alasgarov, who was visibly concerned as he shared this information, said that the GOAJ has been keeping a careful eye on "increased attention" from Iran in recent months, including increased numbers of Iranians traveling to Azerbaijan. He added that there has been an increase in anti-Azerbaijani propaganda coming from Iran, focused on the creation of an Islamic state in Azerbaijan. Alasgarov said the Iranians have been particularly active in Nardaran (a village north of Baku, on the Absheron peninsula), where they have funded NGOs and other social activities in an effort to spread their influence in this conservative Muslim community.

¶4. (S/NF) Comment: Although the MNS spokesperson initially announced that this group was arrested on charges of plotting a coup, information provided by both Alasgarov and the MNS today indicates that the group was engaged in the planning of acts of terrorism. None of our political contacts has any information about the detainees, leading us to believe that they were seemingly ordinary, politically unconnected citizens with no obvious political agenda. Moreover, in

stark contrast to the days immediately following the October 2006 arrests of former Ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov on coup-plotting charges, neither the activist community nor the press is attributing these arrests to domestic political motivations. We continue to monitor the situation carefully.

DERSE